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ABSTRACT

Markus and Nurius (1986) are credited with developing the concept of possible selves, which represents individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they fear becoming. It has been applied in research and practice with adolescents exploring career choices; adults in transition; and older adults envisioning and adjusting to life in the "third age." Possible selves have been called "behavioral blueprints;" they help guide behavior and action toward what we want to become (hoped-for selves) and away from undesired outcomes (feared selves). Research has uncovered differences in the way individuals construct possible selves that reflect different experiences regarding opportunity structure, stereotypes, and social messages about potential and identity. Studies have examined variations in terms of cultural background, gender, and class. Individuals need help to recognize the influence of the dominant culture and subcultures on their possible selves and to prevent foreclosure of options. Techniques for working with possible selves are imagery and visualization, narrative, and mapping. (Contains a 21-item annotated bibliography.) (YLB)

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Possible Selves: Envisioning the Future

by Sandra Kerka
2003

Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they fear becoming. Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius (1986) are credited with developing the concept. It has been applied in research and practice with adolescents exploring career choices (Kerpelman et al. 2002; Packard and Nguyen 2003; Shepard and Marshall 1999; Yowell 2002), adults in transition (Beyer and Hannah 2002; Ibarra 1999; Trentham 2000), and older adults envisioning and adjusting to life in the "third age" (Frazier et al. 2000, 2002; Smith and Freund 2002; Waid and Frazier 2003). Recent research is extending it to the exploration of how educational relationships influence adult learning (Rossiter 2003). Possible selves have been called "behavioral blueprints" (Robinson and Davis 2001); they help guide behavior and action toward what we want to become (hoped-for selves) and away from undesired outcomes (feared selves). The notion reflects both the influence of cognition and emotions on behavior ("if you dream it, you can become it") as well as the ways in which others (e.g., parents, teachers) validate or invalidate possible selves and affect our aspirations (Kerpelman et al. 2002; Lips 1999; Packard and Nguyen 2003).

Research has uncovered differences in the way individuals construct possible selves, which reflect different experiences regarding opportunity structure, stereotypes, and social messages about potential and identity. Studies have examined variations in terms of cultural background (Kerpelman et al. 2002; Marshall et al. 2002; Waid and Frazier 2003; Yowell 2002), gender (Lips 1999; Packard and Nguyen 2003), and class (Robinson and Davis 2001). Lips (1999) concludes that simply removing restrictions and barriers is not enough to empower groups who have been affected by them. Individuals need assistance in recognizing the influence of the dominant culture and subcultures on their possible selves and preventing foreclosure of options (Meara et al. 1995; Plimmer et al. 1999-2000). Techniques for working with possible selves include imagery and visualization (Fletcher 2000), narrative (Whitty 2000), and mapping (Shepard 2000). The following resources provide additional information.

Resources

Beyer, J. M., and Hannah, D. R. "Building on the Past: Enacting Established Personal Identities in a New Work Setting." ***Organization Science*** 13, no. 6 (November-December 2002): 636-652.
A study of the socialization of veteran workers changing jobs showed that experienced subjects strove to maintain established identities they brought with them to their new settings and were active participants in their own socialization through their own established selves. Socialization tactics tended to reinforce established identities and may have hindered adjustment.

Fletcher, S. "A Role for Imagery in Mentoring." ***Career Development International*** 5, nos. 4-5 (2000): 235-243.
Examples of imagery and visualization in medicine, sports, and preservice teaching explore the potential of these techniques in mentoring relationships. They help proteges develop a positive self-image in a new role, make mentors' experience more explicit, and depict possible selves toward which proteges can work.

Frazier, L. D.; Hooker, K.; Johnson, P. M.; and Kaus, C. R. "Continuity and Change in Possible Selves in Late Life: A 5-Year Longitudinal Study." ***Basic & Applied Social Psychology*** 22, no. 3 (September 2000): 237-243.
Describes a longitudinal study on how the passage of time would affect the future self-image of older adults and examines whether possible selves would display continuity or change. Identifies the influence of psychosocial factors (health locus of control, life satisfaction). Shows that hoped-for and feared possible selves remain stable and balanced over time.

Frazier, L. D.; Johnson, P. M.; G., Gema, K.; and Kafka, C. L. "Psychosocial Influences on Possible Selves: A Comparison of Three Cohorts of Older Adults." ***International Journal of Behavioral Development*** 26, no. 4 (July 2002): 308-317.
Examined the psychosocial factors that influence the possible selves of older adults in 3 cohorts: young-old (60-74), old (75-84), and oldest old (85+). Health was the most important domain of self for the oldest group. Findings illuminate how sense of self is influenced by the changing developmental context of the later years, the importance of exploring alternative conceptions of aging, and possible points of intervention to help older adults age more successfully.

Ibarra, H. "Provisional Selves: Experimenting with Image and Identity in Professional Adaptation." ***Administrative Science Quarterly*** 44, no. 4 (December 1999): 764-792.
Describes how people adapt to new roles by experimenting with provisional selves that serve as trials for possible but not yet fully elaborated professional identities. Qualitative data from professionals in transition to more senior roles reveal that adaptation involves three basic tasks: (1) observing role models to identify potential identities, (2) experimenting with provisional selves, and (3) evaluating experiments against internal standards and external feedback.

Kerpelman, J. L.; Shoffner, M. F.; and Ross-Griffin, S. "African American Mothers' and Daughters' Beliefs about Possible Selves and Their Strategies for Reaching the Adolescents' Future Academic and Career Goals." ***Journal of Youth & Adolescence*** 31, no. 4 (August 2002): 289-302.
Examined African-American mothers' and daughters' beliefs about daughters' possible selves and their relevance to future academic and career goals. The vast majority expected that daughters would become college educated, employed, responsible, and independent yet socially connected. The relative importance of possible selves was related to the strategies that mothers and daughters used to help the adolescent reach her goals.

Lips, H. M. "Educational Pathways to Power." Opening Address: 2000 and Beyond: Women in Education, Mid-Term Council Meeting of the New Zealand Federation of University Women, February 19, 1999. http://www.runet.edu/~gstudies/sources/nz/keyaddr.htm
Examined how college students imagined their possible powerful selves and absorbed cultural messages about power and gender. Students were asked to describe their possible selves as powerful persons and leaders. Women were less optimistic than men about holding positions of power and were more likely to anticipate problems associated with being political leaders.

Markus, H., and Nurius, P. "Possible Selves." ***American Psychologist*** 41, no. 9 (September 1986): 954-969.
Possible selves, which link cognition and motivation, are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats. They function as incentives for future behavior and provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self.

Marshall, A.; Shepard, B.; and Batten, S. "First Nations and Rural Youth: Career Exploration Narratives." Paper presented at the 28th Annual Conference of the National Consultation on Career Development, 2002. http://icdl.uncg.edu/pdf/030603-07.pdf
First Nations youth aged 16-19 in Canada constructed life-space maps and explored their "possible selves." Degree of development varied considerably. Some had clearly identified their paths and described a

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number of actions that supported their goals. Those with less developed selves had difficulty connecting behaviors to what they wanted to achieve or avoid.

Meara, N. M.; Day, J. D.; Chalk, L. M.; and Phelps, R. E. "Possible Selves: Applications for Career Counseling." ***Journal of Career Assessment*** 3, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 259-277.
"Possible selves" is a way of thinking about one's occupational future by envisioning oneself in potential roles. It links self-concept with incentives for future behavior. Examples of its use with racial/ethnic minorities and women demonstrate its broad applicability.

Packard, B. W.-L., and Nguyen, D. "Science Career-Related Possible Selves of Adolescent Girls: A Longitudinal Study." ***Journal of Career Development*** 29, no. 4 (Summer 2003): 251-263.
Of 41 female high school graduates of an intensive math/science program, 30 pursued science, math, engineering, or computer careers; 6 maintained initial career aspirations throughout adolescence; 12 chose their current aspiration from initial ones; 8 developed new aspirations; and 15 shifted initial aspirations to new ones. Internships, mentoring, and intensive programs helped them negotiate possible selves.

Plimmer, G.; Smith, M.; Duggan, M.; and Englert, P. "Career Adaptability, Well-being, and Possible Selves." ***Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*** 15, no. 4 (Winter 1999-2000): 83-92.
Themes related to the concept of adaptability and well-being psychology include long-term perspective, relationships, self-development, and future focus. These themes may be combined into the construct of "possible selves," which links well-being and career development.

Robinson, B. S., and Davis, K. L. "The Occupational Possible Selves of Low-Income Women." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA, August 24-28, 2001. (ED 461 809) http://icdl.uncg.edu/pdf/040202-01.pdf
Low-income women attending adult basic education or community college development classes in rural Tennessee completed questionnaires examining their occupational possible selves and their locus of control. No significant differences existed between the groups in the number of hoped-for and feared selves generated nor in the total number of role models reported. Both groups reported more role models for feared selves than for hoped-for selves.

Rossiter, M. "Constructing the Possible: A Study of Educational Relationships and Possible Selves." In ***Proceedings of the 44th Annual Adult Education Research Conference***, edited by D. Flowers et al., pp. 363-368. San Francisco: San Francisco State University, 2003.
Research on 110 adult undergraduate students found that educational relationships (interactions with teachers, advisors, mentors) are sources of possible selves and a context for their elaboration (e.g., information and guidance for education or career plans, role models). The more detailed and well defined a possible self, the more purposeful, intentional, and motivated the learner.

Shepard, B. "Creating Meaning and Making Connections: Lifeplanning Exploration Workshop." Paper presented at the 26th Annual Conference of the National Consultation on Career Development, Ottawa, Ontario, January 24-26, 2000. (ED 462 639) http://icdl.uncg.edu/pdf/010202-01.pdf
The possible selves mapping exercise is designed to stimulate young people to develop new views of self within the context of their world. It can generate a number of hopes and fears for the future, develop client understanding and appreciation of personal values, and connect current activities with hopes and fears for the future.

Shepard, B., and Marshall, A. "Possible Selves Mapping: Life-Career Exploration with Young Adolescents." ***Canadian Journal of Counselling*** 33, no. 1 (January 1999): 37-54.
The "Possible Selves Mapping Interview" was developed and used with 42 young adolescents. All participants generated at least two possible selves. Occupational hoped-for and safety-feared selves were the most prevalent themes.

Smith, J., and Freund, A. M. "The Dynamics of Possible Selves in Old Age." ***Journals of Gerontology: Series B: Psychological Sciences & Social Sciences*** 57B, no. 6 (November 2002): 492-500.
Future-oriented motives are thought to be cast off in old age. Transcripts of the hopes and fears of 206 adults aged 70-103 indicated that, over time, 72% added new domains of hopes and 53% added new fears. Individual differences in stability and change in matched hopes and fears about health and personal identity were associated with changes in health. Findings indicate that possible selves remain a dynamic system during old age.

Trentham, S. L. "Possible Selves and Their Influences on Employees during Changing Times in the Workplace." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Reno, 2000.
Examined employees' career-related possible selves and their reactions to a company merger. Respondents were classified according to their generation (or lack) of career-related possible selves: hoped-for career self, feared career self, and noncareer self. Both career self groups showed relationships between their possible self indicators and work reactions. Women revealed less balance among their hoped-for and feared career selves and reported more feared relationship selves than men did.

Waid, L. D., and Frazier, L. D. "Cultural Differences in Possible Selves during Later Life." ***Journal of Aging Studies*** 17, no. 3 (August 2003): 251-268.
Explored the ways in which culture may influence the hoped-for and feared possible selves of older adults (50 Spanish-speaking and 50 non-Hispanic English-speaking). The possible selves of native English speakers reflect an individualistic culture; those of native Spanish speakers reflect a collectivistic culture. Native English speakers were more likely to have hoped-for selves in the abilities/education domain and feared selves in the physical domains. Native Spanish speakers were more likely to report feared possible selves associated with loss of loved ones and both hoped and feared selves related to family.

Whitty, M. "Possible Selves: Exploring the Utility of a Narrative Approach." ***Identity*** 2, no. 3 (July 2002): 211-228.
Explored young men's and women's hopes and dreams for the future using a story-writing method compared with an interview and a questionnaire. Revealed that story-writing provided rich data that generated themes that were taken up by the other methods and was more successful than the other methods at bringing to light subjects' ideal selves.

Yowell, C. M. "Dreams of the Future: The Pursuit of Education and Career Possible Selves among Ninth Grade Latino Youth." ***Applied Developmental Science*** 6, no. 2 (April 2002): 62-72.
Examined 415 Latino ninth-graders' hoped-for, expected, and feared selves, the power of those selves to predict risk status for school dropout, and the content of their specificity and ideological beliefs. Hoped-for selves represented the highest levels of educational and occupational attainment. Although hoped-for and expected selves did not predict students' academic performance, feared selves did.

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